

WMF News

WMF is a section of the Simon Stevin Centrum
Edition 2 of 2015

Composed by Frank PHILIPPART

GREAT BRITAIN

Pillboxes on the Isles of Scilly

Frank Philippart



Last summer my wife and I passed our holidays at an exotic destination. Not that we went far to the south or to the east, but it was more the way how we had to get there! We travelled to the Isles of Scilly. This group of islands lies in the Atlantic ocean 45 Km west of Land's End, the most western point of the main island of the UK. Well, coming from Belgium, it wasn't that obvious. First with the car to Calais, then the ferry and then from Dover to Newquay in Cornwall to catch a plane the next morning!

It really was worth the effort! I would recommend the island to everyone who loves nature, blue water, white beaches, rocks and peace!

The islands have the mildest climate of the entire UK, there's even a vineyard, a small one, but it's a vineyard! The vegetation is also out of the ordinary. On one hand you see moors like in the Highlands and on the other hand you see plants that we've seen in Sicily!

The archipelago has 140 uninhabited and 5 inhabited islands. 140 sounds a lot, but you have to know that the majority are rocks and lumps. On these 5 islands lived in

2011 2203 people. If we look more in detail then we see that on the biggest island St Mary's lived 1666 people. St Mary's is 6.29 Km². Tresco follows with 180 inhabitants, St Martin's with 142, Bryher with 92 and finally St Agnes with 73 people. St Mary's counts the major 'city', Hugh Town, the village Old Town and the hamlet Telegraph.



My surprise was great to find ancient fortifications and concrete pillboxes on St Mary's. Reasons enough to dig for more information!



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The airfield on St Mary's was built in 1937.

In September 1939, the garrison consisted of one company of soldiers with the HQ at the Star Castle. There were air raid shelters, but no anti-aircraft guns. And there was also no significant naval presence.

On 21st August 1940 a German airplane bombed the Radio Direction Finding Station at Peninnis Head. This was a civil aviation installation. More raids against Peninnis Head followed after this one.



One of the two 4 cm Bofors guns at St Mary's.

and air rescue flying boats)

On 19th May 1941 six Hurricanes of 87 Squadron were installed on St Mary's. These six aircraft became 1449 Flight. By coincidence after the Hurricanes were just landed, there was an alert one hour later. One of the Hurricanes scrambled and shot down a sea-plane.

The beaches and the military installations were defended by barbed wire and about 30 pillboxes were built around the coast of St Mary's. Some of them were manned by the Home Guards.

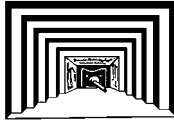
In May 1941 MTB's (Motor Torpedo Boats) were stationed in St Mary's Pool. St Mary's became also the base for the RAF and Naval rescue launches and the emergency base for the Coastal Command flying boats.

After the raid of the 29th August, concerns were raised and the situation was discussed at the War Cabinet. Prime minister Winston Churchill declared that the islands had to be kept at all costs! This resulted in the following actions. Two destroyers were anchored in St Mary's Pool to provide extra air defence. On the 2nd of September the Chief of Staffs decided to double the garrison to two independent companies being in total 1000 men. Two 4 cm Bofors guns were also installed.

The air raids continued until the beginning of February 1941 against Telegraph Tower, RAF Newford (the Ground Controlled Interception Station for guiding fighters to intercept bombers



Telegraph tower during the war.



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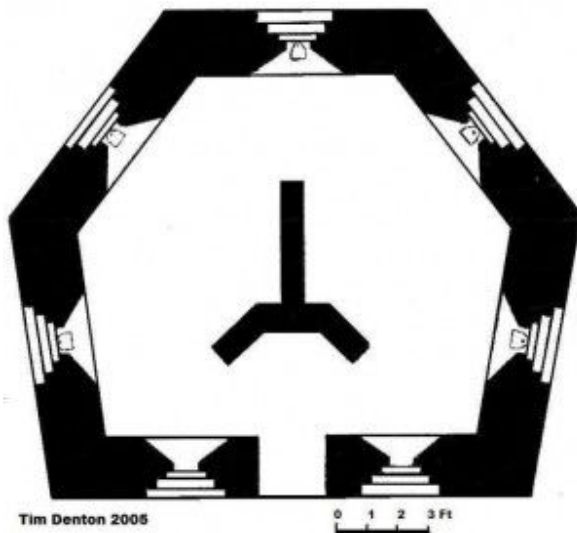
In the same year a secret experimental torpedo unit was established on the island. The air raids continued but several bombers were shot down by the Hurricanes. That caused the Luftwaffe to declare a 90 mile no-fly zone around the islands during daylight in 1942. With this measurement the air raids stopped. The runways were extended and a hangar was built. Unfortunately buildings of that period were of a temporary nature and the last one was destroyed in 1990.

In 1943 an experimental 'Racon' Beacon was installed on the Woolpack Battery by a Canadian unit. It was an antenna on a 8.5 m high wooden pole. The transmitter was powered by a generator (there were two generators in case of a failure) in one of the former gun emplacements. The operators sat in the underground quarters. This installation broadcasted a continuous pattern of 'dots' which aircraft navigators used to fix their position. In April 1944 a generator and other equipment for a Final Responder Beacon were installed in the battery at Mount Todden. This was a blind landing aid for aircraft.

After D-Day the threat for the islands was over. The Hurricanes left on 17th September 1944 and in December of that year the Star Castle was decommissioned. One of the last noteworthy incidents was the sinking of the U681 by a B24 Liberator.

The war caused the death of 23 soldiers of which 16 have been buried in the graveyard of Old Town.

The pillboxes on St Mary's are mainly a **Type 24**.



A pillbox Type 24 has an irregular hexagonal plan with the rear wall longer than the others and containing the entrance with usually an embrasure to each side of it. The rear wall measures approximately 3.65 m and the other walls begin from 1.8 m up to 2.4 m in length. Walls are often about 30 cm (1 foot) thick, although many pillboxes of this type have walls up to 90 cm (3 foot) in thickness.

The majority of the defense works in the UK date back from 1940 -1941. More than 18000 pillboxes were built in 1940. In June 1940, branch FW3 of the War Directorate of Fortifications and Works created designs for a dozen standard pillboxes against a German invasion. However a multiplicity originated locally from tactical point of view, materials and preferences.

The pillboxes had a number of horizontal loop holes with measurements of 15 cm (6") to 30.5 cm (12"). The majority of them were intended for rifles (Lee Enfield) or light machine guns (Bren guns).

Most of the polygonal designs had a Y-shape or a crucifix shape wall in the middle to stop bullets ricocheting in the pillbox.

The pillboxes were camouflaged with earth or an outer layer of bricks.



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Pillbox 7 at Tolman Point. This one has a small entrance part.



Pillbox 5 at Old Town.



Pillbox 8 at Porth Hellick.





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The remains of pillbox 9 at Bar Point



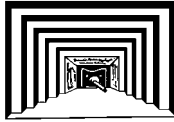
The basement of pillbox 10 at Carn Morval Point



Pillbox 2 incorporated in the ancient battery at Woolpack Point.



Pillbox 1 at Steval Point in front of the 18th - 19th century defence wall of the Garrison at Steval Point.



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Sources :

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ARTILLERY

Piece of heritage found in a Belgian barracks

You'll for sure remember the article about the 155 mm howitzer found on the barracks ground of Lombardsijde.

You could read that it was a Schneider **O.C.6**" Haut. Meaning.

O means 'obusier' = howitzer

C means 'campagne' = field

6 means the 6th 155 mm howitzer design from Schneider

'Haut' means a high siege carriage firing over a parapet.



A reader popped up with another definition for the indication **6"**. He said that it could be the caliber, 6 inch being 152.4 cm instead of the 6th design.

I contacted the author of the book "L'artillerie Lourde de Campagne Belge 1914-1940", Mr Roger Lothaire, to clear this out.

Mr Lothaire says that it's a OC 6th howitzer design with a caliber of 6 inch. Why such a strange caliber? They were intended for Russia where these calibers were used. (in GB as well)

Thanks to Yvonne Mayo for the spell check.

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